

Religious violence

Religious violence is a term that covers phenomena where religion is either the subject or the object of violent behavior.^[1] Religious violence is, specifically, violence that is motivated by or in reaction to religious precepts, texts, or doctrines. This includes violence against religious institutions, people, objects, or events when the violence is motivated to some degree by some religious aspect of the target or by the precepts of the attacker. Religious violence does not refer exclusively to acts committed by religious groups, but includes acts committed by secular groups against religious groups.

Violence is a very broad concept and it is also difficult to define since it can be used against non-human objects.^[2] Furthermore, the term can denote a wide variety of experiences such as blood shedding, physical harm, forcing against personal freedom, passionate conduct or language, or emotions such as fury and passion.^[3]

Religion is a complex and problematic concept.^[4] It is a modern western-compartmentalized concept that was not found anywhere before the 1500s and despite it being recently invented, there is no scholarly consensus over what a religion is.^{[5][4][6]} In general, religion is conceived as an abstraction which entails beliefs, doctrines, and sacred places even though the ancient cultures that wrote Holy Scriptures (e.g. Bible, Quran, etc) did not have such a concept in their language or in their history.^{[6][4]} Decades of anthropological, sociological, and psychological research have shown that the assumption that religious beliefs and values are tightly integrated in an individual's mind or that religious practices and behaviors follow directly from religious beliefs, is actually rare. People's religious ideas are fragmented, loosely connected, and context-dependent just like in all other domains of culture and life.^[7]

In general, religions, ethical systems, and societies rarely promote violence as an end in itself since violence is universally undesirable.^[2] At the same time, there is a universal tension between the general desire to avoid violence and the acceptance of justifiable uses of violence to prevent a "greater evil" that permeates all cultures.^[2] Religious violence, like all violence, is a cultural process that is context-dependent and very complex.^[8] Oversimplifications of religion and violence often lead to misguided understandings and exaggerations of causes for why some people commit violence and why most do not commit violence.^[8] Religious violence is primarily the domain of the violent "actor", which may be distinguished between individual and collective forms of violence. Overall, religious violence is perpetrated for a wide variety of ideological reasons and is generally only one of the contributing social and political factors that leads to unrest.

Studies of supposed cases of religious violence often conclude that violence is strongly driven by ethnic animosities rather than by religious worldviews.^[9] Recently, scholars have questioned the very concept of "religious violence" and the extent to which religious, political, economic, or ethnic aspects of a conflict are even meaningful.^[10] Some observe that the very concept of "religion" is a modern invention and not something that is universal across cultures or historical and thereby makes "religious violence" a myth.^{[10][11]} Since all cases of violence and war include social, political, and economic dimensions and since there is no consensus on definitions of "religion" among scholars and no way to isolate "religion" from the rest of the more likely motivational dimensions, it is incorrect to label any violent event as "religious".^{[11][10]} Numerous cases of supposed acts of religious violence such as the Thirty Years War, the



The Crusades were a series of military campaigns fought mainly between Roman Catholic Europe and Muslims. Shown here is a battle scene from the First Crusade.

French Wars of Religion, the Protestant-Catholic conflict in Ireland, the Sri Lankan Civil War, 9/11 and other terrorist attacks, the Bosnian War, and the Rwandan Civil War were all primarily motivated by social, political, and economic issues rather than religion.^{[11][12]}

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History of the concept of religion

Religion is a modern Western concept.^[5] The concept of religion is not found anywhere before the 1500s.^[4] Furthermore, parallel concepts are not found in many cultures and there is no equivalent term for "religion" in many languages.^[4] Scholars have found it difficult to develop a consistent definition, with some giving up on the possibility of a definition^{[13][14]} and others rejecting the term entirely. Others argue that regardless of its definition, it is not appropriate to apply it to non-Western cultures.^{[15][5]}

The modern concept of "religion" as an abstraction which entails distinct sets of beliefs or doctrines is a recent invention in the English language since such usage began with texts from the 17th century due to the splitting of Christendom during the Protestant Reformation and more prevalent colonization or globalization in the age of exploration which involved contact with numerous foreign and indigenous cultures with non-European languages.^{[16][17]}

Ancient sacred texts like the Bible and the Quran did not have a concept of religion in their original languages and neither did their authors or the cultures to which they belonged.^{[6][4]} It was in the 19th century that the terms "Buddhism", "Hinduism", "Taoism", and "Confucianism" first emerged.^{[16][18]}

There is no precise equivalent of "religion" in Hebrew, and Judaism does not draw clear distinctions between religious, national, racial, or ethnic identities.^[19]

Definition of violence

Violence is difficult to define because the term is a "thick concept" in that it broadly carries a descriptive and evaluative components which ranges from harming non-human objects to human self-harm.^[2] Ralph Tanner cites the definition of violence in the Oxford English Dictionary as "far beyond (the infliction of) pain and the shedding of blood." He argues that, although violence clearly encompasses injury to persons or property, it also includes "the forcible interference with personal freedom, violent or passionate conduct or language (and) finally passion or fury."^[3] Similarly, Abhijit Nayak writes:

The word "violence" can be defined to extend far beyond pain and shedding blood. It carries the meaning of physical force, violent language, fury, and, more importantly, forcible interference.^[20]

Terence Fretheim writes:

For many people, ... only physical violence truly qualifies as violence. But, certainly, violence is more than killing people, unless one includes all those words and actions that kill people slowly. The effect of limitation to a "killing fields" perspective is the widespread neglect of many other forms of violence. We must insist that violence also refers to that which is psychologically destructive, that which demeans, damages, or depersonalizes others. In view of these considerations, violence may be defined as follows: any action, verbal or nonverbal, oral or written, physical or psychical, active or passive, public or private, individual or institutional/societal, human or divine, in whatever degree of intensity, that abuses, violates, injures, or kills. Some of the most pervasive and most dangerous forms of violence are those that are often hidden from view (against women and children, especially); just beneath the surface in many of our homes, churches, and communities is abuse enough to freeze the blood. Moreover, many forms of systemic violence often slip past our attention because they are so much a part of the infrastructure of life (e.g., racism, sexism, ageism).^[21]

Relationships between religion and violence

Charles Selengut characterizes the phrase "religion and violence" as "jarring," asserting that "religion is thought to be opposed to violence and a force for peace and reconciliation. He acknowledges, however, that "the history and scriptures of the world's religions tell stories of violence and war even as they speak of peace and love."^[22]

According to Matthew Rowley, three hundred contributing causes of religious violence have been discussed by some scholars, however he notes that "violence in the name of God is a complex phenomenon and oversimplification further jeopardizes peace because it obscures many of the causal factors."^[23] In another piece, Matthew Rowley notes 15 ways to address the complexity of violence, both secular and religious, and notes that secular narratives of religious violence tend to be erroneous or exaggerated due to over simplification of religious people, their beliefs, thinking in false dichotomies, and ignoring complex secular causes of supposed "religious violence". He also notes that when discussing religious violence, one should also note that the overwhelming majority of religious people do not get inspired to engage in violence.^[8]

Ralph Tanner similarly describes the combination of religion and violence as "uncomfortable", asserting that religious thinkers generally avoid the conjunction of the two and argue that religious violence is "only valid in certain circumstances which are invariably one-sided".^[24]

Michael Jerryson argues that scholarship on religion and violence sometimes overlook non-Abrahamic religions. This tendency provides considerable problems, one of which is the support of faulty associations. For example, he finds a persistent global pattern to align religious like Islam as a cause for violence and others like Buddhism as an explanation of peace.^[25]

In many instances of political violence, religion tends to play a central role. This is especially true of terrorism, which sees violence committed against unarmed noncombatants in order to inspire fear and achieve some political goal. Terrorism expert Martha Crenshaw suggests that religion is just a mask used by political movements to draw support. Crenshaw outlines two approaches in observing religious violence to view the underlying mechanisms.^[26] One approach, called the instrumental approach, sees religious violence as acting as a rational calculation to achieve some political end. Increasing the costs of performing such violence will help curb it. Crenshaw's alternate approach sees religious violence stemming from the organizational structure of religious communities, with the heads of these communities acting as political figureheads. Crenshaw suggests that threatening the internal stability of these organizations (perhaps by offering a nonviolent alternative) will dissuade religious organizations from performing political violence. A third approach sees religious violence as a result of community dynamics rather than religious duty.^[27] Systems of meanings developed within these communities allow for religious interpretation to justify violence, and so acts like terrorism happen because people are part of communities of violence.^[28] In this way, religious violence and terrorism are performances designed to inspire an emotional reaction from both those in the community and those outside of it.

While religion can be used as a means of rallying support for violence, religious leaders regularly denounce such manipulations as contrary to the teachings of their belief.^{[29][30]}

Hector Avalos argues that religions create violence over four scarce resources: access to divine will, knowledge, primarily through scripture; sacred space; group privileging; and salvation. Not all religions have or use these four resources. He believes that religious violence is particularly untenable as these resources are never verifiable and, unlike claims to scarce resources such as water or land, cannot be adjudicated objectively.^[31]

Regina Schwartz argues that all monotheistic religions are inherently violent because of an exclusivism that inevitably fosters violence against those that are considered outsiders.^[32] Lawrence Wechsler asserts that Schwartz isn't just arguing that Abrahamic religions have a violent legacy, but that the legacy is actually genocidal in nature.^[33]

Challenges to the views that religions are violent

Behavioral studies

Decades of anthropological, sociological, and psychological research have established that "religious congruence" (the assumption that religious beliefs and values are tightly integrated in an individual's mind or that religious practices and behaviors follow directly from religious beliefs or that religious beliefs are chronologically linear and stable across different contexts) is actually rare. People's religious ideas are fragmented, loosely connected, and context-dependent, as in all other domains of culture and in life. The beliefs, affiliations, and behaviors of any individual are complex activities that have many sources including culture.^[7]

Myth of religious violence

Others such as William Cavanaugh have argued that it is unreasonable to attempt to differentiate "religious violence" and "secular violence" as separate categories. Cavanaugh asserts that "the idea that religion has a tendency to promote violence is part of the conventional wisdom of Western societies and it underlies many of our institutions and policies, from limits on the public role of churches to efforts to promote liberal democracy in the Middle East." Cavanaugh challenges this conventional wisdom, arguing that there is a "myth of religious violence", basing his argument on the assertion that "attempts to separate religious and secular violence are incoherent".^[34] Cavanaugh asserts:

- Religion is not a universal and transhistorical phenomenon. What counts as "religious" or "secular" in any context is a function of configurations of power both in the West and lands colonized by the West. The distinctions of "Religious/Secular" and "Religious/Political" are modern Western inventions.
- The invention of the concept of "religious violence" helps the West reinforce superiority of Western social orders to "nonsecular" social orders, namely Muslims at the time of publication.
- The concept of "religious violence" can be and is used to legitimate violence against non-Western "Others".
- Peace depends on a balanced view of violence and recognition that so-called secular ideologies and institutions can be just as prone to absolutism, divisiveness, and irrationality.

John Morreall and Tamara Sonn have argued that all cases of violence and war include social, political, and economic dimensions. Since there is no consensus on definitions of "religion" among scholars and no way to isolate "religion" from the rest of the more likely motivational dimensions, it is incorrect to label any violent event as "religious".^[11] They note that since dozens of examples exist from the European wars of religion that show that people from the same religions fought each other and that people from different religions became allies during these conflicts, the motivations for these conflicts were not about religion.^[11] Jeffrey Burton Russell has argued that the fact that these wars of religion ended after rulers agreed to practice their religions in their own territories, means that the conflicts were more related to political control than about people's religious views.^[12]

Anthropologist Jack David Eller asserts that religion is not inherently violent, arguing "religion and violence are clearly compatible, but they are not identical." He asserts that "violence is neither essential to nor exclusive to religion" and that "virtually every form of religious violence has its nonreligious corollary."^{[35][36]} Moreover, he argues that religion "may be more a marker of the [conflicting] groups than an actual point of contention between them".^[37] John Teehan takes a position that integrates the two opposing sides of this debate. He describes the traditional response in defense of religion as "draw(ing) a distinction between the religion and what is done in the name of that religion or its faithful." Teehan argues, "this approach to religious violence may be understandable but it is ultimately untenable and prevents us from gaining any useful insight into either religion or religious violence." He takes the position that "violence done in the name of religion is not a perversion of religious belief... but flows naturally from the moral logic inherent in many religious systems, particularly monotheistic religions...." However, Teehan acknowledges that "religions are also powerful sources of morality." He asserts, "religious morality and religious violence both spring from the same source, and this is the evolutionary psychology underlying religious ethics."^[38]

Historians such as Jonathan Kirsch have made links between the European inquisitions, for example, and Stalin's persecutions in the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, McCarthy blacklists, and other secular events as being the same type of phenomenon as the inquisitions.^[39]

Others, such as Robert Pape, a political scientist who specializes in suicide terrorism, have made a case for secular motivations and reasons as being foundations of most suicide attacks that are oftentimes labeled as "religious".^[40] Pape compiled the first complete database of every documented suicide bombing during 1980–2003. He argues that the news reports about suicide attacks are profoundly misleading — "There is little connection between suicide terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism, or any one of the world's religions". After studying 315 suicide attacks carried out over the last two decades, he concludes that suicide bombers' actions stem fundamentally from political conflict, not religion.^[41]

Secularism as a response

Byron Bland asserts that one of the most prominent reasons for the "rise of the secular in Western thought" was the reaction against the religious violence of the 16th and 17th centuries. He asserts that "(t)he secular was a way of living with the religious differences that had produced so much horror. Under secularity, political entities have a warrant to make decisions independent from the need to enforce particular versions of religious orthodoxy. Indeed, they may run counter to certain strongly held beliefs if made in the interest of common welfare. Thus, one of the important goals of the secular is to limit violence."^[42] William T. Cavanaugh writes that what he calls "the myth of religious violence" as a reason for the rise of secular states may be traced to earlier philosophers, such as Spinoza, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Voltaire.^[43] Cavanaugh delivers a detailed critique of this idea in his 2009 book *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*.

Secular violence

Religious-secular congruency and overlap

Tanner notes that secular regimes and leaders have used violence to promote their own agendas.^[44] Violence committed by secular governments and people, including the anti-religious, have been documented including violence or persecutions focused on religious believers and those who believe in the supernatural.^{[45][46][47][48][49][50][51][52][53]} For example, in the 20th century, over 25 million believers perished from the antireligious violence which occurred in many atheist states.^[54] Non-religious ideological fervour is commonly and regularly exploited to support war and other aggressive acts. People who wish to wage war and terror will find diverse ways to gather support. Secular ideologies have and will likely continue to use violence, oppression, and manipulation to further their own objectives, with or without the availability of religion as a tool. Wars that are secular in nature need no specifically religious endorsement and regularly operate with and without the support of non-religious ideologies. In addition, there exist few examples of wars waged for specifically religious reasons.^{[51][55]} Examples of violence and conflict that have been secular include World War I, World War II, many civil wars (American, Salvadoran, Russian, Sri Lankan, Chinese etc.), revolutionary wars (American, French, Russian, etc.), Vietnam War, Korean War, War on Terrorism, and common conflicts such as gang and drug wars (e.g. Mexican Drug War). In the 'Encyclopedia of Wars' by Charles Phillips and Alan Axelrod, there were 1763 wars listed overall,^[55] of which some have identified only 123 (7%) as having been primarily religiously motivated.^{[51][56][57]} Talal Asad, an anthropologist, notes that equating institutional religion with violence and fanaticism is incorrect and that devastating cruelties and atrocities done by non-religious institutions in the 20th century should not be overlooked. He also notes that nationalism has been argued as being a secularized religion.^[58]

Abrahamic religions

Hector Avalos argues that, because religions claim divine favor for themselves, over and against other groups, this sense of righteousness leads to violence because conflicting claims to superiority, based on unverifiable appeals to God, cannot be adjudicated objectively.^[59]

Similarly, Eric Hickey writes, "the history of religious violence in the West is as long as the historical record of its three major religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, with their involved mutual antagonisms and their struggles to adapt and survive the secular forces that threaten their continued existence."^[60]

Regina Schwartz argues that all monotheistic religions, including Christianity, are inherently violent because of an exclusivism that inevitably fosters violence against those who are considered outsiders.^[32] Lawrence Wechsler asserts that Schwartz isn't just arguing that Abrahamic religions have a



The St. Bartholomew's Day massacre of French Protestants in 1572

violent legacy, but that the legacy is actually genocidal in nature.^[61]

Bruce Feiler writes that "Jews and Christians who smugly console themselves by claiming that Islam is the only violent religion are willfully ignoring their past. Nowhere is the struggle between faith and violence described more vividly, and with more stomach-turning details of ruthlessness, than in the Hebrew Bible".^[62]

However, Tom O'Golo declares that religious fundamentalists who use violence to further their cause contravene the root truth of all faiths:

A genuine fundamentalist is also a radical, someone who tries to get the root of the matter. A major weakness of many or perhaps of most radicals is not that they don't dig, but that they don't dig deep enough. Consequently many fundamentalists end up defending or acting upon beliefs which are not really at the heart of their doctrine. For example any religious fundamentalist who harms others in the pursuit of his or her radicalism is strictly out of order because no true religion ever encounters anything but love, tolerance and understanding. 'Thou shalt not kill' is at the heart of all genuine faiths, certainly the three based upon Abraham and God. That trio comprehensively condemns intentional harm to others (and to the self as well) for what ever reason. Dying to protect one's faith is acceptable; killing to promote it isn't. Arguably, it is blasphemous to say that God needs an earthly army to fight Its battles, or perform Its revenge. God is quite capable of fighting His own battles.^[63]

Christianity

Before the 11th century, Christians had not developed a doctrine of "Holy war", whereby fighting itself might be considered a penitential and spiritually meritorious act.^{[64][65]} Throughout the Middle Ages, force could not be used to propagate religion.^[66] For the first three centuries of Christianity, the Church taught the pacifism of Jesus and notable church fathers such as Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Origen, and Cyprian of Carthage even went as far as arguing against joining the military or using any form of violence against aggressors.^[65] In the 4th century, St. Augustine developed a "Just War" concept, whereby limited uses of war would be considered acceptable in order to preserve the peace and retain orthodoxy if it was waged: for defensive purposes, ordered by an authority, had honorable intentions, and produced minimal harm. However, the criteria he used was already developed by Roman thinkers in the past and "Augustine's perspective was not based on the New Testament."^[65] St. Augustine's "Just War" concept was widely accepted, however, warfare was not regarded as virtuous in any way.^[64] Expression of concern for the

salvation of those who killed enemies in battle, regardless of the cause for which they fought, was common.^[64] In the medieval period which began after the fall of Rome, there were increases in the level of violence due to political instability. By the 11th century, the Church condemned this violence and warring by introducing: the "Peace of God" which prohibited attacks on clergy, pilgrims, townspeople, peasants and property; the "Truce of God" which banned warfare on Sundays, Fridays, Lent, and Easter; and it imposed heavy penances on soldiers for killing and injuring others because it believed that the shedding of other people's blood was the same as shedding the blood of Christ.^[65]

During the 9th and 10th centuries, multiple invasions occurred in some regions in Europe and these invasions lead them to form their own armies in order to defend themselves and by the 11th century, this slowly lead to the emergence of the Crusades, the concept of "holy war", and terminology such as "enemies of God".^[64] By the time of the



I Believe in the Sword and Almighty God (1914) by Boardman Robinson.

Crusades, "Despite all the violence during this period, the majority of Christians were not active participants but were more often its victims" and groups like the Franciscans were established which used nonviolent means to peacefully dialogue with Muslims.^[65]

Today the relationship between Christianity and violence is the subject of controversy because one view advocates the belief that Christianity advocates peace, love and compassion while it has also resorted to violence in certain instances.^{[32][59][67]} Peace, compassion and forgiveness of wrongs done by others are key elements of Christian teaching. However, Christians have struggled since the days of the Church fathers with the question of when the use of force is justified (e.g. the Just war theory of Saint Augustine). Such debates have led to concepts such as just war theory. Throughout history, certain teachings from the Old Testament, the New Testament and Christian theology have been used to justify the use of force against heretics, sinners and external enemies. Heitman and Hagan identify the Inquisitions, Crusades, wars of religion, and antisemitism as being "among the most notorious examples of Christian violence".^[68] To this list, Mennonite theologian J. Denny Weaver adds "warrior popes, support of capital punishment, corporal punishment under the guise of 'spare the rod spoil the child,' justifications of slavery, world-wide colonialism under the guise of converting people to Christianity, the systemic violence against women who are subjected to the rule of men". Weaver employs a broader definition of violence that extends the meaning of the word to cover "harm or damage", not just physical violence per se. Thus, under his definition, Christian violence includes "forms of systemic violence such as poverty, racism, and sexism".^[69]

Christian theologians point to a strong doctrinal and historical imperative against violence that exists within Christianity, particularly Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, which taught nonviolence and "love of enemies". For example, Weaver asserts that Jesus' pacifism was "preserved in the justifiable war doctrine which declares that all war is sin even when it is occasionally declared to be a necessary evil, and in the prohibition of fighting by monastics and clergy as well as in a persistent tradition of Christian pacifism".^[70]



Between 1420 and 1431 the Hussite heretics fended off 5 anti-Hussite Crusades ordered by the Pope.

Many authors highlight the ironical contradiction between Christianity's claims to be centered on "love and peace" while, at the same time, harboring a "violent side". For example, Mark Juergensmeyer argues: "that despite its central tenets of love and peace, Christianity—like most traditions—has always had a violent side. The bloody history of the tradition has provided images as disturbing as those provided by Islam or Sikhism, and violent conflict is vividly portrayed in the Bible. This history and these biblical images have provided the raw material for theologically justifying the violence of contemporary Christian groups. For example, attacks on abortion clinics have been viewed not only as assaults on a practice that Christians regard as immoral, but also as skirmishes in a grand confrontation between forces of evil and good that has social and

political implications.",^{[71]:19–20} sometimes referred to as spiritual warfare. The statement attributed to Jesus "I come not to bring peace, but to bring a sword" has been interpreted by some as a call to arms to Christians.^[71]

Maurice Bloch also argues that Christian faith fosters violence because Christian faith is a religion, and religions are by their very nature violent; moreover, he argues that religion and politics are two sides of the same coin—power.^[72] Others have argued that religion and the exercise of force are deeply intertwined, but that religion may pacify, as well as channel and heighten violent impulses^[73]

In response to criticism that Christianity and violence are intertwined, Christian apologists such as Miroslav Volf and J. Denny Weaver reject charges that Christianity is a violent religion, arguing that certain aspects of Christianity might be misused to support violence but that a genuine interpretation of its core elements would not sanction human violence but would instead resist it. Among the examples that are commonly used to argue that Christianity is a violent religion, J. Denny Weaver lists "(the) crusades, the multiple blessings of wars, warrior popes, support for capital punishment, corporal punishment under the guise of 'spare the rod and spoil the child,' justifications of slavery, world-

wide colonialism in the name of conversion to Christianity, the systemic violence of women subjected to men". Weaver characterizes the counter-argument as focusing on "Jesus, the beginning point of Christian faith,... whose Sermon on the Mount taught nonviolence and love of enemies;; who faced his accusers nonviolent death;whose nonviolent teaching inspired the first centuries of pacifist Christian history and was subsequently preserved in the justifiable war doctrine that declares all war as sin even when declaring it occasionally a necessary evil, and in the prohibition of fighting by monastics and clergy as well as in a persistent tradition of Christian pacifism."^[69]

Miroslav Volf acknowledges that "many contemporaries see religion as a pernicious social ill that needs aggressive treatment rather than a medicine from which cure is expected." However, Volf contests this claim that "(the) Christian faith, as one of the major world religions, predominantly fosters violence." Instead of this negative assessment, Volf argues that Christianity "should be seen as a contributor to more peaceful social environments".^[74]

Volf examines the question of whether Christianity fosters violence, and has identified four main arguments that it does: that religion by its nature is violent, which occurs when people try to act as "soldiers of God"; that monotheism entails violence, because a claim of universal truth divides people into "us versus them"; that creation, as in the Book of Genesis, is an act of violence; and that the intervention of a "new creation", as in the Second Coming, generates violence.^[67] Writing about the latter, Volf says: "Beginning at least with Constantine's conversion, the followers of the Crucified have perpetrated gruesome acts of violence under the sign of the cross. Over the centuries, the seasons of Lent and Holy Week were, for the Jews, times of fear and trepidation; Christians have perpetrated some of the worst pogroms as they remembered the crucifixion of Christ, for which they blamed the Jews. Muslims also associate the cross with violence; crusaders' rampages were undertaken under the sign of the cross."^[75] In each case, Volf concluded that the Christian faith was misused in justifying violence. Volf argues that "thin" readings of Christianity might be used mischievously to support the use of violence. He counters, however, by asserting that "thick" readings of Christianity's core elements will not sanction human violence and would, in fact, resist it.^[76]

Volf asserts that Christian churches suffer from a "confusion of loyalties". He asserts that "rather than the character of the Christian faith itself, a better explanation of why Christian churches are either impotent in the face of violent conflicts or actively participate in them derives from the proclivities of its adherents which are at odds with the character of the Christian faith." Volf observes that "(although) explicitly giving ultimate allegiance to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, many Christians in fact seem to have an overriding commitment to their respective cultures and ethnic groups."^[77]

Mormonism

Mormonism had an early history of violence. This began with religious persecution on the Mormons by well respected citizens, law enforcement, and government officials. Ultimately such persecution lead to several historically well-known acts of violence. These range from attacks on early Mormons, such as the Haun's Mill massacre following the Mormon Extermination Order to one of the most controversial and well-known cases of retaliation violence, the Mountain Meadows massacre. This was the result of an unprovoked response to religious persecution whereby an innocent party traveling through Mormon occupied territory was attacked on September 11, 1857.

Islam

Islam has been associated with violence in a variety of contexts, especially in the context of Jihad. In Arabic, the word *jihād* translates into English as "struggle". Jihad appears in the Qur'an and frequently in the idiomatic expression "striving in the way of Allah (*al-jihad fi sabil Allah*)".^{[78][79]} The context of the word can be seen in its usage in Arabic



Forward with God! (1915) by Boardman Robinson.

translations of the New Testament such as in 2 Timothy 4:7 where St. Paul expresses keeping the faith after many struggles.^[80] A person engaged in jihad is called a *mujahid*; the plural is *mujahideen*. Jihad is an important religious duty for Muslims. A minority among the Sunni scholars sometimes refer to this duty as the sixth pillar of Islam, though it occupies no such official status.^[81] In Twelver Shi'a Islam, however, Jihad is one of the ten Practices of the Religion. For some the Quran seem to endorse unequivocally to violence.^[82] On the other hand, some scholars argue that such verses of the Quran are interpreted out of context.^{[83][84]}

According to a study from Gallup, most Muslims understand the word "Jihad" to mean individual struggle, not something violent or militaristic.^[80] Muslims use the word in a religious context to refer to three types of struggles: an internal struggle to maintain faith, the struggle to improve the Muslim society, or the struggle in a holy war.^[85] The prominent British orientalist Bernard Lewis argues that in the Qur'an and the ahadith *jihad* implies warfare in the large majority of cases.^[86] In a commentary of the hadith *Sahih Muslim*, entitled al-Minhaj, the medieval Islamic scholar Yahya ibn Sharaf al-Nawawi stated that "one of the collective duties of the community as a whole (*fard kifaya*) is to lodge a valid protest, to solve problems of religion, to have knowledge of Divine Law, to command what is right and forbid wrong conduct".^[87]

Islam has a history of nonviolence and negotiation when dealing with conflicts. For instance, early Muslims experienced 83 conflicts with non-Muslims and only 4 of these ended up in armed conflict.^[80]

Terrorism and Islam

In western societies the term *jihad* is often translated as "holy war".^{[88][89]} Scholars of Islamic studies often stress that these words are not synonymous.^[90] Muslim authors, in particular, tend to reject such an approach, stressing the non-militant connotations of the word.^{[91][92]}

Islamic terrorism refers to terrorism by Muslim groups or individuals who are motivated by either politics, religion or both. Terrorist acts have included airline hijacking, kidnapping, assassination, suicide bombing, and mass murder.^{[93][94][95]}

The tension reached a climax on September 11th, 2001 when Islamic terrorists flew hijacked commercial airplanes into the World Trade Center in New York City and The Pentagon in Washington, D.C. The "War on Terror" has triggered anti-Muslim sentiments within Christendom and throughout the rest of the world. Al-Qaeda is one of the most well known Islamic extremist groups, created by Osama bin Mohammed bin Awad bin Laden. Al-Qaeda's goal is to spread the "purest" form of Islam and Islamic law. Based on his interpretation of the Quran, bin Laden needed to do "good" by inflicting terror upon millions of people. Following the terrorist attacks on September 11, bin Laden praised the suicide bombers in his statement (https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/binladentext_121301.html): *"the great action you did which was first and foremost by the grace of Allah. This is the guidance of Allah and the blessed fruit of jihad"*. In contrast, echoing the overwhelming majority of people who interpreted these events, President Bush said on September 11, *"Freedom itself was attacked this morning by a faceless coward... And freedom will be defended. Make no mistake, the United States will hunt down and punish those responsible for these cowardly acts."*^[96] Despite the interpretations of Islam espoused by a few militant sects, Islam is not a fundamentally violent religion. Certain groups hold the view that the Quran should be interpreted literally, while others believe that with the changing course of history, the interpretation of it should also change.



Sketch by an eye-witness of the massacre of Armenians in Sasun in 1894



Indonesian military forces evacuate refugees from Ambon during the Maluku sectarian conflict in 1999

Controversies surrounding the subject include disagreements over whether terrorist acts are self-defense or aggression, national self-determination or Islamic supremacy; whether Islam can ever condone the targeting of non-combatants; whether some attacks described as Islamic terrorism are merely terrorist acts committed by Muslims or terrorist acts motivated by nationalism; whether Zionism and the Arab-Israeli Conflict are at the root of Islamic terrorism, or simply one cause of it; how much support for Islamic terrorism exists in the Muslim world^[97] and whether support of terrorism is only a temporary phenomenon, a "bubble", now fading away.^[98]



Wounded people following a bomb attack by Boko Haram in Nigeria, in April 2014

Judaism

Burggraave and Vervenne describe the Old Testament as full of violence and as evidence of both a violent society and a violent god. They write that, "(i)n numerous Old Testament texts the power and glory of Israel's God is described in the language of violence." They assert that more than one thousand passages refer to YHWH as acting violently or supporting the violence of humans and that more than one hundred passages involve divine commands to kill humans.^[99]

On the basis of these passages in the Old Testament, some Christian churches and theologians argue that Judaism is a violent religion and that the god of Israel is a violent god. Reuven Firestone asserts that these assertions are usually made in the context of claims that Christianity is a religion of peace and that the god of Christianity is one who only expresses love.^[100]

Some scholars such as Deborah Weissman readily acknowledge that "normative Judaism is not pacifist" and that "violence is condoned in the service of self-defense."^[101] J. Patout Burns asserts that, although Judaism condones the use of violence in certain cases, Jewish tradition clearly posits the principle of minimization of violence. This principle can be stated as "(wherever) Jewish law allows violence to keep an evil from occurring, it mandates that the minimal amount of violence must be used in order to accomplish one's goal."^[102]

The love of peace and the pursuit of peace, as well as laws requiring the eradication of evil, sometimes using violent means, co-exist in the Jewish tradition.^{[103][104][105][106]}

The Hebrew Bible contains instances of religiously mandated wars^{[107][108][109]} which often contain explicit instructions from God to the Israelites to exterminate other tribes, as in Deuteronomy 7:1–2 (<http://bible.oremus.org/?passage=Deuteronomy+7:1-2:1&version=nrsv>) or Deuteronomy 20:16–18 (<http://bible.oremus.org/?passage=Deuteronomy+20:16-18:16&version=nrsv>). Examples include the story of the Amalekites (Deuteronomy 25:17–19 (<http://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0525.htm#17>), 1 Samuel 15:1–6 (<http://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt08a15.htm#1>)),^[110] the story of the Midianites (Numbers 31:1–18 (<http://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0431.htm#1>)),^[111] and the battle of Jericho (Joshua 6:1–27 (<http://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0606.htm#1>)).^{[112][113][114][115][116]}

These wars of extermination have been characterized as "genocide" by several authorities,^{[117][118][119]} because the Torah states that the Israelites annihilated entire ethnic groups or tribes: the Israelites killed all Amalekites, including men, women, and children (1 Samuel 15:1–20 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Samuel+15%3A1-20&version=NIV>)); the Israelites killed all men, women, and children in the battle of Jericho (Joshua 6:15–21 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=joshua+6%3A15-21&version=NIV>)), and the Israelites killed all men, women and children of several Canaanite tribes (Joshua 10:28–42 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=joshua+10%3A28-42&version=NIV>)).^[120] However, some scholars believe that these accounts in the Torah are exaggerated or metaphorical.

Zionist leaders sometimes used religious references as a justification for the violent treatment of Arabs in Palestine.^{[121][122]} On several occasions, Palestinians have been associated with Biblical antagonists, the Amalekites. For example, Rabbi Israel Hess has recommended that Palestinians be killed, based on biblical verses such as 1 Samuel 15.^{[123][124][125]}

Other religions

Buddhism

Hinduism

Sikhism

Neo-paganism

In the United States and Europe, neo-pagan beliefs have been associated with many terrorist incidents. Although the majority of neo-pagans oppose violence and racism, folkish factions of Odinism, Wotanism, and Ásatrú emphasize their Nordic cultural heritage and warrior idealism.^[126] For these reasons, a 1999 Federal Bureau of Investigation report on domestic terrorism titled Project Megiddo described Odinism as “[lending] itself to violence and [having] the potential to inspire its followers to violence”.^[127] As of 2017, the Southern Poverty Law Center has recognized at least two active neo-pagan hate groups in the United States.^[128] Many white supremacists (especially those in prison) are converting to Odinism at increasing rates, citing the impurity of Christianity and the failure of previous groups to accomplish goals as the primary reasons for their conversion.^{[129][130]} Similarities between Odinism and other extremist groups such as Christian Identity facilitate conversions.^[131] The targets of neo-pagan violence are similar to those of white supremacist terrorists and nationalist terrorists, but an added target includes Christians and churches.



Thuggee was a secret cult of assassins whose members were both Hindus and Muslims.

Notable incidents:

- **Murder of Alan Berg:** Defunct American white supremacist group the Order was founded by avid practitioners of Wotanism such as David Lane and Robert Jay Mathews.^[127] Lane was convicted of the 1984 murder of Jewish radio host Alan Berg.^[132]
- **Church burnings:** A wave of church burnings in Norway during the 1990s has been cited as an act of neo-pagan terrorism.^{[133][134]} The arsons coincided with a resurgence in the popularity of European black metal. This genre of music featured the imagery and ideas of neo-paganism, Satanism, and nationalism. The targets were Christian churches, and up to 28 churches were targeted during this period.^[135] Popular black metal musician Varg Vikernes, a noted neo-pagan and nationalist, was convicted of three of these arsons and charged with a fourth attempt.
- **Overland Park Jewish Community Center:** Frazier Glenn Miller Jr. shot and killed three people at a Kansas Jewish community center in 2014. Prior to becoming an Odinist, Miller Jr. was a member of the Ku Klux Klan.^[136]

Conflicts and wars

It has been noted that "religious" conflicts are not exclusively based on religious beliefs but should instead be seen as clashes of communities, identities, and interests that are secular-religious or at least very secular.^{[37][51][40]}

Some have asserted that attacks are carried out by those with very strong religious convictions such as terrorists in the context of global religious war.^[137] Robert Pape, a political scientist who specializes in suicide terrorism argues that much of the modern Muslim suicide terrorism is secularly based.^[40] Although the causes of terrorism are complex, it

may be safe to assume that terrorists are partially reassured by the religious views that God is on their side and that He will reward them in Heaven for punishing unbelievers.^{[138][139]}

These conflicts are among the most difficult to resolve, particularly when both sides believe that God is on their side and that He has endorsed the moral righteousness of their claims.^[138] One of the most infamous quotes associated with religious fanaticism was uttered in 1209 during the siege of Béziers, a Crusader asked the Papal Legate Arnaud Amalric how to tell Catholics from Cathars when the city was taken, to which Amalric replied: "*Caedite eos. Novit enim Dominus qui sunt eius*," or "Kill them all; God will recognize his."^[140]

Ritual violence

Ritual violence may be directed against victims (e.g., human and nonhuman animal sacrifice and ritual slaughter) or self-inflicted (religious self-flagellation).

According to the hunting hypothesis, created by Walter Burkert in *Homo Necans*, carnivorous behavior is considered a form of violence. Burkett suggests that the anthropological phenomenon of religion grew out of rituals that were connected with hunting and the associated feelings of guilt over the violence that hunting required.^[141]

See also

- List of countries by discrimination and violence against minorities
- Witch-hunt
- Hundred Years' War
- Religion and peacebuilding
- Religious fanaticism
- Pacifism and religion
- Taliban
- Religions for Peace
- Peace in Islamic philosophy
- Religious discrimination in Pakistan
- Religious violence in India
- Religious violence in Nigeria

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".. the Zionist movement, which claims to be secular, found it necessary to embrace the idea of 'the promised land' of Old Testament prophecy, to justify the confiscation of land and the expulsion of the Palestinians. For example, the speeches and letters of Chaim Weizman, the secular Zionist leader, are filled with references to the biblical origins of the Jewish claim to Palestine, which he often mixes liberally with more pragmatic and nationalistic claims. By the use of this premise, embraced in 1937, Zionists alleged that the Palestinians were usurpers in the Promised Land, and therefore their expulsion and death was justified. The Jewish-American writer Dan Kurzman, in his book *Genesis 1948* ... describes the view of one of the Deir Yassin's killers: 'The Sternists followed the instructions of the Bible more rigidly than others. They honored the passage (Exodus 22:2): 'If a thief be found ...' This meant, of course, that killing a thief was not really murder. And were not the enemies of Zionism thieves, who wanted to steal from the Jews what God had granted them?'"
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External links

- William T. Cavanaugh Resources from Jesus Radicals (<https://web.archive.org/web/20140228091001/http://www.jesusradicals.com:80/theology/william-cavanaugh/>)
 - Myth of Religious conflict in Africa (http://www.africanholocaust.net/news_ah/war_myth_religion.html)
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